



Guam Governor Urges Women to Lead for Change

Quick take:

- *As the US territory's first female governor, 'Lou' Leon Guerrero says she was strongly influenced by her upbringing in the matrilineal Chamoru culture.*
- *While critics decried her imposition of strict COVID restrictions on the island, she said her experience as a nurse guided her decisions.*
- *She urged women to "be a warrior" in moving into leadership roles.*

HONOLULU (March 31, 2022) – As an Indigenous Chamoru woman, Guam Governor Lourdes Aflague Leon Guerrero says her upbringing and culture, in which lineage and property were passed down through the maternal side of the family, strongly influenced her outlook and career. When a cousin once remarked that she didn't count because she was a girl, her mother told her to never accept the notion that females don't matter.

Every day, I would stand in front of the mirror and say: 'You are important, you are important, you are important,' the governor remembered during a recent virtual "talk story" event presented by the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific's [Women of the Wave network](#) and viewed by audience members across the Pacific.



[Click to view event video.](#)

Leon Guerrero, who goes by 'Lou,' is one of several women who have been elected to top leadership positions in Pacific Islands governments in recent years, including Sāmoa Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa and former Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine. During the talk story session, part of a series featuring female leaders in the region, she reflected on the values that sustained her work as a registered nurse, head of the Bank of Guam, founder of the Guam Women's Chamber of Commerce, senator in the Guam Legislature, and the US territory's first female governor.

Leading from maternal values

After growing up on Guam with her parents and two brothers, Leon Guerrero moved to

California at 18, receiving her bachelor's degree in nursing and a master's in public health. She was active in women's rights efforts and reproductive choice, she said.

After returning home she worked at a hospital, where she recalled a doctor once ordering her to administer medication that she felt would be wrong. She told the doctor to give it to the patient himself, and he backed down.

Leon Guerrero said her desire to do the right thing in challenging situations is rooted in her maternal impulse to nurture and be helpful. While men may have similar instincts, she said, she believes women are more inclined to lead from those emotions.

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"I look at the pandemic in that way," Leon Guerrero said. Using projections based on scientific models, she feared that Guam, with a population of about 170,000, could suffer a loss of 3,000 lives if immediate steps were not taken. While her detractors called her a dictator for imposing strict COVID restrictions, she said her experience as a nurse guided her decisions.

"Your gut feeling is something to be listened to," she said.

Confronting bias

Women leaders need to be knowledgeable, resourceful and strategic, Leon Guerrero said. She remembered opposing a "terrible law" that prevented Micronesians from receiving treatment in Guam hospitals because they were not US citizens. Guerrero said she organized several Chuukese women to challenge the law, and it was later ruled unconstitutional.

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One of the most significant accomplishments of her decades-long public service career began with meeting a 14-year-old girl who was dying of cancer, she recounted. The encounter with teenager Natasha Perez led to legislation in 2005 banning smoking in restaurants and bars on Guam, following vigorous lobbying by the girl and her young friends.

Although Perez died on the very day a judge issued a ruling affirming the ban, the governor said, the law, called the Natasha Protection Act, has become the teen's legacy. To others, she urged: "Don't give up if you think something will make our lives better. Be a warrior."

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